

THE
SCIENTIFIC DECEPTION
OF THE NEW ATHEISTS

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Introduction

The growth of agnosticism in the Western world in recent times has been remarkable. In both the UK and US, to take just two examples, there has been an increase in Christian apostasy the like of which has never been recorded in recent history. The exponential growth of agnosticism has coincided, by and large, with the spread of New Atheism. New Atheists like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens and Daniel Dennett are distinguished as much by polemical style as argumentative substance; their main stylistic distinguisher seemingly is outrage on the effects of religion on society (Taylor). Aside from moral outrage, New Atheists typically employ a series of scientific and religious arguments which range from postulating that Darwinism negates the design argument for God's existence, to arguments suggesting that religion has and continues to inhibit scientific development. Considering the demographic movement towards agnosticism in the West, the vital question is how effective have these arguments been?

To address this, I will strive to explain the arguments made by atheist apologists. By approaching the matter from a historical perspective, I will also compare various theological reactions (both Christian and Muslim) to science in general, and ask whether the New Atheist narrative of a clash between science and religion has manifested in history. I will subsequently describe the sociological approaches that seek to explain processes of secularisation and assess how useful these may be in understanding a movement towards agnosticism. Next, I will examine the demographic and survey data focusing on the English speaking world and establish whether Muslims and Christians both choose science (or Darwinism in particular) as reasons for apostasy. Finally, I will assess competing Muslim and Christian theological scientific claims and will examine how these claims are refuted by New Atheists' use of social media to further their cause. To this end, I will use python-based programmes to assess the Twitter accounts of five New Atheist apologists for one year and the interaction people have with tweets on these accounts. Since New Atheists depend largely on social media, this layer of analysis aims to uncover the effectiveness of New Atheist arguments on religious individuals; both Christian and Muslim, in English speaking contexts.

Given that New Atheist polemics are intended as an attack on religion, it is vital that both Christian and Muslim religious leaders are aware of and capable of responding to the arguments of the New Atheists. Above all, religious leaders have a social duty to edify their congregation members on issues which may not be directly theological, but which do impact theology.

New Atheist's Scientific Arguments Against Theism

New Atheists view Darwinism as a means to almost disprove the existence of God. For instance, Richard Dawkins details the central argument against the 'God thesis' in his book by summarising it into six points. He concludes by stating that if the argument is accepted 'the factual premise of religion – the God hypothesis – is untenable. God almost certainly does not exist' (Dawkins, 2006, p.156). Firstly, he claims that 'one of the greatest challenges to the human intellect, over the centuries, has been to explain how the complex, improbable appearance of design arises' and that 'the natural temptation is to attribute the appearance of design to actual design itself.' Elaborating further on his third and fourth points, Dawkins continues, 'the temptation is a false one, because the designer hypothesis immediately raises the question of who designed the designer'. At this point Dawkins writes:

Darwin and his successors have shown how living creatures, with their spectacular statistical improbability and appearance of design, have evolved by slow, gradual degrees from simple beginnings. We can now safely say that the illusion of design in living creatures is just that – an illusion (Dawkins, 2006, p.157-8).

For Dawkins, Darwin 'made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist' (Dawkins, 1986, p.2). Dawkins admits that the world of physics has not resulted in an equivalent theory of Darwinian evolution, but believes it to be the responsibility of physicists to find such equivalent cosmological theories. To this end Dawkins states:

And although Darwinism may not be directly relevant to the inanimate world – cosmology for example – it raises our consciousness in areas outside its original territory of biology (Dawkins, 2006, p.113).

Therefore, according to Dawkins, it is Darwin and Darwin alone who allows atheists to articulate a cogent case against the argument from design – which is to Dawkins 'in a nutshell the creationists' favourite argument' (Dawkins, 2006, p.113). Dawkins considers

reference to God as superfluous as ‘God wouldn’t have to do anything at all’ for living beings to be the way they are (Dawkins, 2006, p.118). Hence, the first argument of the New Atheists is that Darwin effectively disproves the strongest evidence for a designer through evolution.

Dawkins’s arguments have been heavily refuted on philosophical grounds. Many such refutations have been made to Dawkins in public debates. For example, John Lennox has refuted the point that Darwinian evolution is incompatible with the God thesis by stating that ‘Dawkins is making a category mistake, he is confusing mechanism with agency’ (Fixed Point Foundation, 2017, 00:30:55). Aware of his own philosophical limitations, Dawkins admits that he is ‘not a philosopher and that will be obvious’ (The Archbishop of Canterbury, 2012, 00:35:52). Nevertheless, Dawkins’s conclusions are shared by some of his philosopher associates who consider Dawkins ‘a colleague and fellow in the cause’ (Grayling, 2014).

A.C. Grayling, who we observed associating himself with other ‘New Atheists’, makes similar arguments against ‘the God thesis’ to Dawkins’s, claiming, ‘moreover the design hypothesis is implausible because it purports to offer an explanation by invoking something itself unexplained’ (Grayling, 2013, p.77). Similar to Dawkins, Grayling spends little time engaging with the stock philosophical theistic contentions; namely reference to an ‘uncaused cause’ as being necessary to break the infinite regress, rather, he opts to invoke Darwinism as a fatal argument against the God thesis. Though Grayling is in agreement with much of Dawkins’s claims, his argument differs slightly. In referencing the fine tuning of the universal constants Dawkins rejects the idea of a designer as a reasonable recourse stating ‘he’s got to be at least complicated enough to do that’ (The Archbishop of Canterbury, 2012, 01:45:30).

Professor Anthony Kenny, who chaired the debate with Dawkins and the ex-Archbishop Rowan Williams, probed Dawkins by differentiating between complexity of structure and complexity of function. Kenny presented the example comparing an electric razor with a cut throat razor and stating that ‘the cut throat razor is more simple in design but has more complex powers than the electric razor’ to which Dawkins replied, ‘I really don’t see what you are saying’ as the Oxford university audience laughed in the background (The Archbishop of Canterbury, 2012, 01:56:40). Having dedicated two pages to the design argument and five to Thomas Aquinas’ five ways, it is safe to conclude that Dawkins’s

philosophical contribution to academia regarding classic arguments has been virtually non-existent. Nevertheless, Dawkins's arguments are contested to a point of *ad hominem* ridicule and degradation. To emphasise this point, Alister McGrath writes that when Dawkins comes to:

deal with anything to do with God he seems to enter a different world, it is a world of a schoolboy debating society, relying on rather heated, enthusiastic overstatements, spiced up with some striking oversimplifications and more than occasional misrepresentation (McGrath, 2007, p.9).

Such generalisations relate to Dawkins's overt scientism, his disregard (or lack of awareness) of philosophical and theological issues (theology being a subject that Dawkins does not appear to believe is 'a subject at all' (Dawkins, 2006, p.57). Professor Michael Ruse, an atheist himself, goes further than this stating:

I have written that The God Delusion made me ashamed to be an atheist and I meant it. Trying to understand how God could need no cause, Christians claim that God exists necessarily. I have taken the effort to try to understand what that means. Dawkins and company are ignorant of such claims and positively contemptuous of those who even try to understand them, let alone believe them. Thus, like a first-year undergraduate, he can happily go around asking loudly, "What caused God?" as though he had made some momentous philosophical discovery (The Archbishop of Canterbury, 2009).

Dennett, much like Dawkins, ridicules and evades a full explication/refutation of the classical first cause arguments claiming:

Some people would much prefer the infinite regress of mysteries, apparently, but in this day and age the cost is prohibitive: you have to get yourself deceived (Dennett, 1995, p.26).

Perhaps the most critiqued aspect of the New Atheist approach is its progression from the natural sciences to religious philosophy. In this regard, McGrath states:

The real issue for me is how Dawkins proceeds from a Darwinian theory of evolution to a confident atheistic world-view which he preaches with messianic zeal and unassailable certainty (McGrath, 2006, p.10).

John Gray considers the New Atheist manipulation of science in attempting to disprove the ‘God hypothesis’ as:

A tedious re-run of a Victorian squabble between science and religion. But the idea that religion consists of a bunch of discredited theories is itself a discredited theory - a relic of the nineteenth-century philosophy positivism (Gray, 2018, p.9).

Gray identified similarities between these ideas and those of Auguste Comte in *Catchechisme Positiviste* (1852) (Gray, 2018, p.10). However, New Atheism transcends positivist assumptions of meaningless or metaphysical discourse as it aims to disprove religion using science. Such an approach has been criticised as it lacks careful distinction between metaphysical and methodological naturalism as noted by Massimo Pigliucci who writes:

The crucial point here is that a scientist is, essentially by definition, a methodological naturalist; however, she does not have any specific commitment (aside from her own metaphysical views) to philosophical naturalism. In other words, science does not necessarily entail atheism, which is the fundamentalist's fear (Pigliucci, 2006, p.2).

Pigliucci furthers this by adding:

There is, therefore, a good reason why many scientists are themselves religious, and it is a mistake (both in terms of public relations and from a philosophical standpoint) to present the scientific worldview as if it necessarily leads to atheism. Science can neither afford, nor does it need, a head-on confrontation with religion (Pigliucci, 2006, p.2).

Elliott Sober echoes Pigliucci stating:

For some people, Newtonian theory and Darwinian theory suggest that there is no God. However, this is not what these theories say; it is a philosophical interpretation that requires additional premises (Sober, 2009, p.376).

New Atheist's Arguments Against Religion

Perhaps distinction should be drawn between two kinds of arguments presented by New Atheists. We have discussed the New Atheist treatment of the 'God hypothesis' as disproved and 'untenable' in the face of new Darwinian explanations. Contrastingly, we have also witnessed philosophical rejection of this postulation by those who rightly differentiate between the evolution mechanism and the supposed agency of a deity who is guiding it. Moreover, we also noted the subtle but important difference between methodological and metaphysical naturalism. Overall this begs the question; can these findings be generalised to religion in general or has religion itself been disproven in light of this new scientific evidence?

Christopher Hitchens writes:

Religion has run out of justifications. Thanks to the telescope and the microscope, it no longer offers an explanation of anything important. Where once it used to be able, by its total command of a worldview, to prevent the emergence of rivals, it can now only impede and retard—or try to turn back—the measurable advances that we have made (Hitchens, 2019, p.282).

On this point, Dawkins claims 'as a scientist, I am hostile to fundamentalist religion because it actively debauches the scientific enterprise' (Dawkins, 2006, p.284). Grayling furthers this from 'fundamentalist' religion to all religion by suggesting '...Darwinism is not compatible with religion; the evidences of biological science are evidences against the presence of supernatural agency in the universe' (Grayling, 2014, p.113). Grayling also states that intelligent design is 'creationism in disguise' (Grayling, 2014, p.109). Clearly, two separate arguments are defined here. Firstly, an argument against the 'God hypothesis', as previously discussed. The second argument concerns religion. To what extent, though, has religious and scientific discourse been entangled according to individuals who take such discourses seriously? This of course is a big question to which there is no simple answer. In what

follows I will outline the main approaches that both Muslim and Christian scholars have taken when answering these questions.

In both Christian and Muslim traditions, religious scriptures have been interpreted in a variety of ways. While discussing ancient Jewish philosophy, David Shatz differentiates between modest and bold concordism. The former allows scriptural reconciliation with science, whereas, the latter assumes ‘positive teaching’ of science in a scripture. Though one cannot generalise approaches to Biblical exegesis, three approaches to the Bible stand out. The first is a modest concordist allegorising approach which emphasises the allegorical nature of the Genesis account. Since the verses are allegorical, it may be argued, theology cannot expand on evolution or Big Bang cosmology. Though this approach has exegetical precedent from the patristic period (most notably from the Alexandrian school), it is often met with challenges. Such challenges, which are beyond the scope of this paper, relate to deciding which verses may or may not be allegorised.

The second approach is the literalist non-concordist approach which, when applied to the Bible, does not need to produce a young-age creationist conception as even some patristic Church Fathers like Augustine (who is infrequent in his allegorisation) may not have considered the days in the Genesis account to be literal (Brooke, 2012, p.8). Nevertheless, a literal approach to Genesis has its own set of ‘scientific’ and historical challenges including interpretations, which have patristic and medieval precedent, and which indicate the universe’s age as six thousand years old. This approach is not non-concordist from its own perspective, as it defines ‘science’ and its processes in ways that differ from classical approaches of philosophy of science. Ken Ham, a Young Age Creationist, divides science into ‘observational’ and ‘historical’ types, the latter of which is highly subject to human interpretation, and where conflict exists, the plain reading of the text must take precedence (Ham, 2013, p.45-55). Proponents of this view refer to a genealogical approach to Genesis 5 which adds up the years from one generation to another, thereby concluding the universe is approximately six thousand years old; see Floyd Nolen Jones’s *The Chronology of the Old Testament*. One can categorise this perspective as rejectionist, on account of its rejecting popularly accepted science.

A third approach, popularised recently by the likes of Dr. Hugh Ross, is a ‘bold concordist’ literalist approach which aims to establish how scientific phenomenon, like the Big Bang, is taught in scripture. Accordingly, such an approach is essentially a literalist Old Age creationist approach but one which crucially stops at the point of human evolution (Ross et al., 2001, p.11).

Much like scholars in the patristic period, like Origen and Augustine mentioned above, early Islamic scholars were also occasionally noticeably concordist, both modestly and boldly. Nevertheless, representatives of major creedal schools of thought, like Ibn Taymiyyah (for the Hanbalis) and AlGhazali (for the Asharis), would interpret verses which reference the physical world in a literal manner (Qadhi and Khan, 2018). The *falasifa* or ‘the philosophers’ most prominently represented by Ibn Sina (like Origen of Alexandria – though perhaps less flagrantly) would prefer allegorising verses which appeared to not correspond with the cosmologies of the day as he did with the theory of ten celestial spheres (Qadhi and Khan, 2018).

Though Ibn Sina and the *falasifa*’s work has survived to the modern day, their exegetical preferences have become practically disregarded particularly after the scathing attacks of both Al-Ghazali in his famous work *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* and Ibn Taymiyyah following *A Response to the Greek Logicians*. In such works, Ibn Sina was ex-communicated from Islam and though Ibn Rushd (Averroes) refuted aspects of this in his *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*, the Sunni-Muslim world appeared to have already decided on the matter. The net result of this historical development was that allegorising historical narratives or verses of naturalistic significance were limited to creedal aspects of referencing Allah’s ‘throne’ (Arsh) and his names and attributes which is notably controversial among Ashari’s, Hanbalis, Maturidis, Mutazili’s, Shia Twelvers and other less well known schools. Quranic exegetes from virtually all of these creedal schools accept the literal correspondence of naturalistic verses with the ‘real world’. Perhaps most notably including exegetes of schools such as Fakhr al Deen al Razi (an Ashari), Ibn Kathir (creedal Hanbali), Al-Zamakhshari (A Mutazli) and Abu Jafar al Tusi (A Shia). Though such exegetes discussed the verses’ symbolic value, virtually none of them achieved what Ibn Sina or Origen were willing to do; namely reduce the verses to a form of aetiology, stripping it of its literal value.

With the creedal exclusion of the *falasifa*'s allegorical exegesis, popular Islamic exegetical approaches to naturalistic verses can be easily divided into three types: bold concordism, modest concordism and modern science rejection. As with Christian scholarship and apologetics, these categories are not fixed as a scholar or apologist may be rejectionist in one context and not in another.

Dr. Zakir Naik is the most popular representative of the Bold concordist literalist approach in the English-speaking world. In a 2017 study, 1006 online videos were identified with the terms 'Islam' and 'science' together on YouTube, and the speaker with the highest output was Zakir Naik (Gardner et al., 2018, p.358). Like Dr. Hugh Ross, Naik indicates that the Quran teaches that the Big Bang occurred, and also like Ross, Naik doesn't accept human evolution because of its contradiction with the plain reading of the text (Gardner et al., 2018, p.385). Naik's scientific arguments are almost identical to those of Dr. Maurice Bucaille who wrote a polemic book titled *The Bible, Quran and Science* effectively arguing that the Bible is incongruent to science on matters related to cosmology, geology and Noah's flood whereas the Quran is in line with such matters (Bucaille and Fahim, 1977, p.96-143; Bucaille and Fahim, 1977, 152-157). This novel evangelising/apologetic Islamic approach (termed the *Ijaaz Ilmi* approach in Arabic) even prompted Salafist clergy members in Saudi Arabia to start a committee on the Scientific Miracles of the Quran and Sunnah (Dallal, 2010, p.171). However, this approach was criticised for employing eisegesis and pseudo-science, especially regarding issues relating to Darwinism and evolution (Gardner et al., 2018, p.385). Criticising this approach, Ahmed Dallal states:

When Muslims were the main producers of science in the world, they did not advocate wedding science and religion. Now, ironically, when Muslim participation in the production of the universal culture of science is dwindling, they call for bringing the two together (Dallal, 2010, p.170).

The second rejectionist approach does not oppose all scientific phenomena, only those deemed contrary to exegetical precedent or clear text. This is best exemplified by the theory of human evolution which is considered incompatible with literal Quranic meanings (Qadhi and Khan, 2018). Unfortunately, much of what has been missing from the discourse (from New Atheists and theologians who attempt to counter them) is a meaningful engagement

with scientific philosophy. For example, theoretically, and when differentiating between methodological and metaphysical naturalisms, it may be suggested that Muslims and Christians who adopt views which may contradict human evolution (or the entire Darwinian enterprise) adopt an instrumental view rather than a realist view. Since instrumentalism does not necessitate believing the literal truth of scientific theory, Muslims and Christians can accept the validity of the Darwinian model (even allowing advances in it within their spaces) without needing to believe in the evolution of homo-sapiens (for example) from other hominids.

Accordingly, Darwinian evolution can act as a useful heuristic, like a London Underground map; though highly useful is not properly to scale. Consequently, inhibitions to scientific progress can be mitigated. Two caveats must be made here. Firstly, if this approach is adopted, claims (made by Ross and Naik for example) that the Big Bang theory is explicitly taught by the Quran or Bible must be softened at least to a modest concordist position. Secondly, it may be difficult to argue (on instrumental grounds) that the age of the universe being fourteen billion years is a ‘model’, as it is a historical claim rather than a model.

New Atheist's Distortion of the History of Science and Religion

Considering all these nuances it is difficult to affirm generalisability of NOMA (non-overlapping magisteria) just as it is difficult to legitimise the New Atheist treatment conception of conflict. On these points, it is vital that Christian and Muslim faith leaders are aware of New Atheism's arguments, thereby allowing them to counter them through inter-disciplinary research that includes, but is not limited to, understanding the history of science. Consequently, it may be useful to initially assess some of the New Atheists' overarching claims. In a striking oversimplification of history Grayling writes:

Whatever else one might think about the chequered history of the relation between science and religion, at least one thing is clear: that they do indeed compete for truth about the origin of the universe, the nature of human beings and whether the universe manifests evidence of intelligent design (Grayling, 2014, p.108).

Most scientific historians consider this conflict model untenable. Using various examples, Ahmed Dallal makes this case for Islam showcasing how scholars like Al-Biruni, Ibn Taymiyyah and Al-Ghazali all had positive approaches to scientific enterprise (Dallal, 2010, p.116). Importantly, he highlights the writings of al Iji, who states, 'All (religious) sciences draw from kalām, whereas it draws from none.' (Dallal, 2010, p.118). Essentially, the entire Kalam discipline could not start with an assumption of God since it mostly concerned proving His existence. Despite the critique of certain aspects of Kalam, it still represented a staple part of Muslim culture and tradition throughout the centuries. Dallal argues that no single reason dictates scientific decline in the Muslim world, rather, it is attributed to a variety of civilizational factors including military confrontations with Europe at a time of rapid European colonial expansion (Dallal, 2010, p.152-6). Syed Nomanul Haq notes a range of jurisprudential considerations, including calculating prayer times, as an incentive for Muslim astronomy from the years 800-1300 (Haq, 2009, p.35).

Regarding the Catholic church's (or Christianity's) scientific and religious history, the 'conflict theory' is also no longer acceptable as an all-purpose explanation. Mentioning the case of Galileo, John Hedley Brooke claims:

The combination of the Galileo story with evidence for a Protestant stimulus to science can easily give the impression that the Catholic Church was generally hostile to scientific innovation. This impression would be false on at least three counts. First, the Church had played a crucial role in the patronage of the sciences... Second, the Jesuit order within the Church contained outstanding astronomers, mathematicians, and physicists who were also committed to teaching the sciences in their educational programs. Third, some of the greatest and most influential scientists of the seventeenth century were Catholics. Galileo, Mersenne, Gassendi, and Descartes all played prominent roles in the mechanization of nature (Brooke, 2010, p.12).

The impact of Protestantism (and Puritanism in particular) has been one of significant sociological study. One study by Robert Merton was highly dependent on data from the Dictionary of National Biography, and examined information from 29,120 biographies of notable figures in the seventeenth century (among other important data sets) concluding that Puritanism (which, to Merton, encouraged a kind of theological utilitarianism) provided an impetus for scientific discovery.

Accordingly, Merton states:

In this direct fashion, religion sanctioned science raising the social estimation of those who pursued scientific investigation, with the associated intensification and spread of interest in such pursuits (Merton, 2002, p.431).

Merton distinguishes the Protestant attitude from the Catholic one by claiming:

This comparison of the Puritan academies in England and Protestant educational developments on the Continent is well warranted. The Protestant academies in France devoted much more attention to scientific and utilitarian subjects than did the Catholic institutions (Merton, 2002, p.478-9).

Merton discusses other contributory factors to the increased interest in science, including military factors; especially new interest in ballistic weaponry (Merton, 2002, p.543). Consequently, one realises the similarity between the Merton thesis and Max Weber's theory in the Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (2013). In reality, many of the arguments used against Weber's thesis may also be used against Merton's which may include either Merton or Weber's inability to account for other nations (most notably Japan) which underwent both capitalism and technological advancement without Protestantism as a catalyst. One may provide an alternative explanation to Protestantism through non-religious utilitarianism (perhaps a Lockian or Hobbesian formulation), as was contemplated by Merton (Merton, 2002, p.589). Overall, it is difficult to pin-point Protestantism or Puritanism as a decisive factor in scientific progress inasmuch as it would be difficult to blame it (or Catholicism) for generally inhibiting science. New Atheists often invoke Darwin as the turning point. There is no evidence, however, that Darwin apostatised from Christianity because of his theory of natural selection. On this point, James Moore claims:

His own testimony is seldom heeded: "I never gave up Christianity until I was forty years of age."

Darwin turned forty in 1849, long after developing his theory of evolution by natural selection (Moore, 2010, p.143) and Brooke agrees that:

The main reasons Darwin gave for his unbelief derived not from the role he gave natural causes in explaining the origin of species. Like other Victorian thinkers, Darwin reacted strongly against evangelical Christian preaching on heaven and hell (Brooke, 2010, p.228).

Origin of Species was published in 1859 during the post-Tanzimaat Ottoman period when most of the Muslim world was colonised. Accordingly, it is difficult to assess a Muslim state response to Darwinism. Nevertheless, it is clear that exegetical conflict did (and continues to) feature at least on the aspect of human evolution, similar to the Christian world. Therefore, models of conflict between all of 'science' and all of 'religion' (considering only two religions are mentioned) are simply ahistorical.

How New Atheism Inhibits Science

Realistically, religious leaders from Muslim and Christian communities may find it advantageous for the cause of social and cultural edification to propose counter-questions to congregation members or religious followers. Moreover, they may limit the corrosive impacts of New Atheist misinformation on historical narratives by conducting research into this area. Such a counter question is exemplified by asking whether New Atheist discourse is itself inhibiting to science. Another example is the Third Way of Evolution group which has hundreds of sciences consisting of non-normative evolutionary ideas which undermine the modern Neo-Darwinian synthesis (see Third Way of Evolution Website). On the website rationale, it states that neo Darwinism:

Is clearly naturalistic science but ignores much contemporary molecular evidence and invokes a set of unsupported assumptions about the accidental nature of hereditary variation. NeoDarwinism ignores important rapid evolutionary processes such as symbiogenesis, horizontal DNA transfer, action of mobile DNA and epigenetic modifications. Moreover, some NeoDarwinists have elevated Natural Selection into a unique creative force that solves all the difficult evolutionary problems without a real empirical basis (The Third Way of Evolution, 2016).

Indeed, one of the organisation's co-founders, Dr. Denis Noble, disagrees with Dawkins on the Selfish Gene idea but is reluctant to dispute Dawkins on the issue (Crace, 2008). Certain Third Way scientific members may be interpreted as rejecting the Darwinian evolutionary mechanism altogether. This is observed with Eugene Koonin's proposal of a 'biological Big Bang' that supposes 'the major types of new forms emerge independently, via a sampling process, from the pool of recombining entities of the preceding generation' (Koonin, 2007, p.1). From this Dr. David Berlinsky in his polemical work against Dawkins states, 'Major transitions in biological evolution,' Koonin writes:

These are precisely the transitions that Darwin's theory was intended to explain. If those "major transitions" represent a "sudden emergence of new forms," the obvious

conclusion to draw is not that nature is perverse but that Darwin was wrong (Berlinksy, 2009:192).

A wide array of biologists – who communicate methodologically naturalistic articulations - and other specialists disagree with aspects of Darwinian theory, but this is glossed over by dogmatic New Atheists like Daniel Dennett who proposes that Darwin’s theory is ‘beyond all reasonable doubt’ (Dennett, 1995, p.11). Theoretically, science is based on induction and can, therefore, never be incorrigible as indicated by Dennett in other contexts, stating ‘Note that the Argument from Design depends on an inductive inference: where there's smoke, there's fire; and where there's design, there's mind’ (Dennett, 1995, p.30). Dennett may substitute the words ‘arguments from design’ to ‘the entire Darwinian enterprise’ and effectively refute his own previous postulation. Scientific dogma may be defined as more inhibiting to scientific advancement than religion as there is no question of overlapping magisteria.

Why has the West become increasingly Irreligious?

Anthony Wallace says:

Belief in supernatural powers is doomed to die out, all over the world, as a result of the increasing adequacy and diffusion of scientific knowledge (Wallace, 1966, p.264-5).

But are developments of scientific knowledge driving people away from the supernatural? Numerous attempts were undertaken to understand the irreligious trajectory witnessed in the West. An exhaustive explication of sociological reasons for this are beyond this paper's scope. The main question under investigation is the extent to which New Atheist scientific argumentation has impacted this trend with one of the first sociological attempts to investigate irreligiosity in England conducted by Susan Budd and described in *Varieties of Unbelief* (1977). Budd used obituaries from secular and ethical organisations of 200 biographies between 1850-1960 (Sheard, 2014, p.1) identifying three causes for unbelief, including 'reading the Bible and rationalist classics, a distrust and resentment towards clergy members and a criticism of belief in immortality' (Budd, 1977, p.106). Science and Darwinism are conspicuously absent here. The periods between 1958-1974 were perhaps most dramatic in demographic movement towards irreligiosity in the Western world. Elaborating on the British context Hugh McLeod mentions individualism, socialism, scientism, feminism, religious criticism, the 'sexual revolution' and post-war affluence as reasons for an irreligious direction (McLeod, 2005, p.206). An irreligious family socialisation was indicated by McLeod (and most sociologists studying this period) as a primary reason for irreligiosity in adulthood (McLeod, 2005, p.228). The criticality of this period in altering to irreligiosity is toughly stated by Callum Brown:

It took several centuries (in what historians used to call the Dark Ages) to convert Britain to Christianity, but it has taken less than forty years for the country to forsake it (Brown, 2009, p.1).

Analysing 836 students in a Canadian context, Bruce Hunsberger identifies primary socialisation in the home as the most salient factor for irreligiosity (Hunsberger, 1984, p.1). Surveying the time period from 1987-2012 from an American context and using the General Social Survey (Davis and Smith, 1992) to inform their results, Michael Hout and Claude Fischer link increased political polarisation as a salient reason for irreligiosity, stating:

Political liberals became substantially more likely to express no religious preference, moderates became somewhat more likely to do so, and political conservatives (Hout and Fischer, 2014, p.438).

Hout and Fischer make special mention of ‘autonomy’ claiming:

Original to this paper, we invoke a value shift toward greater autonomy and away from traditional authority. In formulating our hypothesis we have drawn on social psychological research in the 1950s that identified the emergence of a positive bias in favor of thinking for oneself we refer to as “autonomy.” Most evidence has been compiled by asking survey respondents to rank things it might be important for a child to learn, including “to think for him or herself” and “to obey” among other potentially desirable qualities (Hout and Fischer, 2014, p.433).

Furthermore, using the General Social Survey (Davis and Smith, 1992) in an American context, Stephen Merino concludes:

The most recent cohorts raised with no religion are even more liberal – percent, compared with roughly 20 percent who self-identify as conservative. Likewise, more recent cohorts raised with no religion are much more likely to express a lack of confidence in churches and religious organizations (Merino, 2012, p.10).

In a British context, Linda Woodhead cites ‘individual freedom’ and ‘liberal democracy’ as a ‘salient factor’ (Woodhead and Catto, 2012, p.253), stating:

My argument is thus that growing pluralisation and liberalisation in Britain have, since the 1970s, been met by opposite tendencies in religion, and that it is this clash which helps to explain the increasingly rapid rise of ‘no religion’. It’s not that religion or spirituality per se have become objectionable to ‘modern man’, as some older secularisation theorists and ‘enlightenment atheists’ liked to think, but that the particular kinds of religion on offer in late modern Britain have not offered the social, spiritual and moral goods which younger people affirm and desire (Woodhead and Catto, 2012, p.258).

Woodhead effectively refutes theories of secularisation, stating:

The patchy global distribution of ‘no religion’ undermines simplistic accounts of secularisation that imagined all countries propelled to the same secular destination point by the irresistible forces of modernisation (Woodhead, 2012, p.254).

Woodhead’s appreciation of census data limitations (collected each decade in England) is useful as it accounts for data skewing due to its collection by heads of households (Woodhead, 2012, p.246). Woodhead mitigates these issues by creating survey questions which scale the extent of a participant’s atheism (Woodhead, 2012, p.49-50), concluding that ‘only 13 percent of ‘nones’ are strongly secular—amounting to under 5 per cent of the population’ (Woodhead, 2012, p.250) and that ‘the growth of ‘no religion’ cannot be conflated with the growth of the secularism championed by the ‘New Atheists’ (Woodhead, 2012, p.250). Fahmi (2018) supports these findings reporting that approximately 90% of Americans believe in a ‘higher power’ despite 26% claiming to have no religion (Pew Research, 2019). Accordingly, only a minority of religious ‘nones’ are ‘confidently’ atheistic. This data is noteworthy as it effectively suggests that the number of ‘confident atheists’ in Britain (5%) is similar to the number of Muslims.

Most Westerners Believe in a Higher Power, and the Failure of the New Atheist Movement

According to the latest religious data from the British attitude survey, Muslims are more likely to retain their faith than any other religious group (93% retention) (Curtice et al., 2019). Moreover, the latest Pew Research study revealed that ‘the share of American Muslims who leave Islam is offset by those who become Muslim’ (Mohammed and Sciupac, 2018) with 23% leaving the faith in the USA. Reasons for leaving include a dislike for organised religion (12%), disbelieving in God (8%), never ‘connecting’ with the faith (8%), not being religious (5%) among others. Despite the lack of science or Darwinism in this study, it is vital to note that most participants could not speak English and required Farsi or Arabic translation. Moreover, those who left Islam in the USA Pew Survey were more likely to be immigrants from Iran (22%) (Pew Research Methodologies). These points may help explain disparities between UK and US Muslim faith retention estimates. Furthermore, these findings do not support Darwinian evolution as having a ‘revolutionary’ theological or demographic impact on the actual masses (either Muslim or Christian) in the Western world. Rather, in both Muslim and Christian cases political ideology, like liberalism, or moral arguments against religion (sometimes with liberal assumptions which undermine key teachings of religion) were most influential as noted by Matthew Sheard, who ran his own study with 98 atheist participants concluding:

As with Budd’s study, the reasons subjects gave for their unbelief included anti-religious causes; objections to theology were as prevalent as traumatic experiences of religion or personal traumas that caused religious doubts. However, though rationalism, atheistic political radicalism and contact with atheists constituted

about a quarter of the reasons given, there was very little reference to the ‘rationalist classics’, to science, or to Darwinism (Sheard, 2014, p.12).

There is little to no evidence that Darwinian evolution creates apostasy in Christian and Muslim faith communities, rather, that it creates doubt as investigated by Youssef Chouhoud. Chouhoud studied 600 Muslim participants from a cross-section of society identifying what causes them to ‘doubt’. 8% of participants attributed their ‘great deal of doubt’ to Darwinian evolution compared to 14% who attributed it to religiously dogmatic attitudes (Chouhoud, 2018, p.6). Ultimately, scientific arguments used by New Atheist apologists may not be instrumental in causing religious apostasy within Muslim or Christian faith communities, however, the scientific arguments were marginally effective in changing the minds of Christians and Muslims.

New Atheists use both book sales and social media to enhance their message, with YouTube videos featuring heavily and New Atheist material being freely available on a variety of non-official sites. Only a few New Atheists have their own YouTube channels including Richard Dawkins who has a channel titled ‘Richard Dawkins Foundation for Science and Reason’ which, despite infrequently posting videos, still has 334, 000 subscribers (18 April 2020). Sam Harris has an official YouTube channel titled ‘Sam Harris’ with 394,000 subscribers (18 April 2020). Other New Atheists, like Lawrence Krauss, host minor channels having 3,140 subscribers (18 April 2020) and are, therefore, not worthy for consideration. Analysing these YouTube figures through Google Trends, puts these figures into perspective. By comparing YouTube search interest of Richard Dawkins against a popular T.V. personality; specifically, the UK social commentator Piers Morgan, from the years 2008 to the present (18 April 2020), Morgan scores 16 ‘average points’ to Dawkins’s 10 over this period.

Analysing ‘web searches’ instead for the same period, establishes an average score of 11 points for Morgan to Dawkins’s 4. If these comparisons are replicated in the US, Dawkins’s social impact lessens. If we compare Sam Harris’ YouTube Google Trends data with the social commentator Joe Rogan for the same period (2008 till April 2020) we find Rogan scores on average 23 points to Harris’ 3 points. Considering that Dawkins and Harris are the most popular New Atheists, it is difficult to imagine that their social media activity can

sufficiently influence demographic change or apostasy among Christians or Muslims in the English-speaking Western world.

New Atheists have more followers on Twitter than other platforms. Twitter, being a text-based programme with limitations on numbers of characters, is a difficult platform through which to alter people's opinions. Nevertheless, having collected the twitter time-lines of the most prominent New Atheists with the aim of analysing re-tweets, likes and responses, I have assessed whether New Atheists have been successful in changing people's minds on these issues by employing the previously outlined scientific arguments. Methodologically, I encountered two primary issues (that Twitter limits the number of time-line tweets to 3200) (see Twitter website). Moreover, even after consultation with Data Scientists to mitigate these issues, I could not identify a way to access the accounts of those who 'retweeted' or 'liked' a said post.

Following collation of the time-lines of Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, Steven Pinker, A. C. Grayling, Lawrence Krauss and Peter Singer, I used key words to establish the number of times these key figures attempted to use their scientific arguments against the 'God thesis' on twitter. Keywords included, but were not limited to, 'bible', 'Quran', 'creation', 'intelligent design', 'creationism', 'creationist', 'Darwin', 'Darwinism' among others. The objective was to establish the efficacy of these tweets on re-tweeters or likers by tracking their behaviour before and after the post was made. Unfortunately this was deemed unnecessary as only four tweets, from Richard Dawkins, seemed to be relevant to the scientific arguments against the God narrative emphasised in New Atheist writings, and all were retweeted from other accounts. The tweet ID's were 918078516608032000, 918078459569737729, 918078401264717000 and 918078321820340225 and they were unextraordinary. For example, Dawkins retweets ' "Without God, living things couldn't be so complex, elegant and functional." If that's what you think, go away and learn some biology.' (Dawkins, Twitter). This statement lacks an argument and confers minimal impact on anyone wanting to apostatise. The comment section of the tweet further outlines the extent to which Dawkins's twitter resembles an atheistic echo chamber, with the most liked comments originating from those already expressing similar sentiments to Dawkins's.

Conclusion

In sum, it is difficult to evidence that scientific arguments against God, the design argument, and religion, have failed to produce apostatising results for the cause of ‘New Atheism’ within Christian and Muslim faith communities in the English-speaking world, although they have generated doubts within religious people. A poll conducted on a YouTube channel hosted by a Muslim influencer, with 254,000 followers and specialising in ‘arguing the case for and educating people about Islam’, sought to assess the cause of doubt by stating: ‘The answers to these questions are obviously anonymous, so please answer as truthfully as possible. If you are a Muslim, what causes you to doubt your religion the most from the following options: Moral arguments against Islam, scientific arguments from Atheist apologists, arguments for the truth of another religion or weaknesses of the ‘Islamic civilisation’ (Hijab, n.d., Retrieved April 11, 2020). 7,200 people responded anonymously to the survey with 48% acknowledging morality as the leading cause for doubt, 21% scientific arguments from New Atheists, 7% for the arguments for the truth of another religion and 24% on the weaknesses of the Islamic ‘civilisation’.

This poll together with the research conducted on doubt by Chouhoud and others that were previously mentioned, confirms that New Atheist arguments have some influence on Muslim and Christian communities. Though the arguments are not historically novel, the forcefulness of the ‘science’ arguments in New Atheist books and debate material, comparative to other social commentaries, make the effect of these arguments isolatable and researchable. Moral and politically philosophical arguments, which were shown to cause more doubt and apostasy for Muslims and Christians in the English-speaking world, are not the exclusive intellectual domain of the New Atheists. Finally, it would seem that New Atheists are steadily losing traction and popularity among younger audiences. Richard Dawkins had an average point score of 100 on Google Trends in November 2006 (following publication of the *God Delusion*) dropping to a meagre 19 comparative points in 2019 after the publication of

Outgrowing God. Considering these stats, it seems difficult to argue that New Atheism will have any lasting demographic effect on religiosity in the future.

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